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Walter Benjamin, 'Mondrian '63-'96', lecture at Cankarjev dom, organised by the Marxist Center and ŠKUC gallery, Ljubljana, 1986. All images courtesy Walter Benjamin

Not Now: A Conversation with Walter Benjamin

–David Morris

*At the time of writing, the adult life of Walter Benjamin – the period of thirty years between 1910 and 1940 – is equal to the thirty years that have passed since the reappearance of Walter Benjamin into public life, in a cultural centre in Ljubljana in 1986.¹ Benjamin's writing these past thirty years (collected in the 2013 volume *Recent Writings*²), and the projects that surround him (such as the Museum of American Art³) have developed a theory of the copy as a meta-original, which is bound up with an 'almost ethnographic' approach towards the belief systems that sustain the field of contemporary art. Here the story of art is told through its founding myths, its rituals, believers and agnostics – its familiar events are retold and repeated until cracks and loops form in the historical record. If this*

Walter Benjamin discusses his theory of meta-time, modernity's futures and the end of 'art' as we know it.

approach is sometimes playful, it seems to say: how else to approach an analysis of the many terrible crises of the contemporary moment, except with a smile? It is also perhaps a counterweight to a much bigger joke, that of trying to step outside,

predict or understand the sweeps of history. In any case, more than capital-h History, it is a reading of the present that seems to drive the contemporary Benjamin: to beckon some alternative, heretofore unrecognisable set of relations; to 'read what was never written', as a 41-year-old Benjamin wrote in 1933, following the most ancient systems of meaning-making, 'entrails, the stars, or dances.'⁴ The technical assistant at the Museum of American Art gave me a Gmail address for Walter Benjamin, and so our conversation began.

David Morris: In our exchanges leading up to this interview, you described yourself as a 'character outside of time'. Could you say more about what this means to you?

Walter Benjamin: Being 'outside of time' means being outside of the linear chronological timeline that is the backbone of history, as a story consisting of unique characters, artefacts and events. Sometimes telling the truth is not exactly the right thing to do. Let's say I go to a theatre for the first time. The play is *Hamlet*. The curtain goes up, and at some point – to my great surprise – I begin to realise that Hamlet is in fact my neighbour Joe, whom I know well. I immediately jump out of my seat and start explaining this to the 'naïve' audience. I would, of course, be telling the truth, but this would be the end of the play. We wouldn't be able to find out where that story would have taken us, or the entire experience that comes with it. This would be one way to interpret my present identity. However, in a theatre there is usually a clear distinction between the stage and the real world, while accepting me, as in this interview, indicates that the 'real world' could be understood as a stage as well, and we are all playing certain roles on it.

DM: And it's now been thirty years since your lecture 'Mondrian '63-'96' in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1986 – the event that marked the reappearance of Walter Benjamin in public life...

WB: In my 1986 lecture, at some point I was trying to understand what might be the consequences of having Mondrian paintings, apparently copies, dated after his death, hanging in two different places on the museum timeline. I ended my lecture with the following realisation: 'These paintings rely neither on the coordinates of time, nor on coordinates of identity,

1 The lecture 'Mondrian '63-'96', organised by the Marxist Center and ŠKUC Gallery, Ljubljana.

2 Walter Benjamin, *Recent Writings*, Los Angeles: New Documents, 2013.

3 The Museum of American Art was featured in *Afterall* 37, with essays by Steven ten Thije and Our Literal Speed: see *Afterall*, issue 37, Autumn/Winter 2014, pp.75-89.

4 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1933, trans. Edmund Jephcott) in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-34* (ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p.722. I am grateful to Denise Ferreira da Silva, Valentina Desideri and other participants at the 'Experiments in Entangled Existence' study group at The Showroom, London, 2016 for discussion/enactment of this text.

nor on coordinates of meaning. They simply hover, and the only comprehensible sense of their existence which we can accept with certainty are these questions themselves.’ Clearly, within a historical narrative there is no place for two identical paintings attributed to the same author, one of them dated after his death. It is a historical impossibility, and that second painting is in some way ‘outside of history’. In order to have this painting placed within a history, we have to change its proposition, for example by using quotation marks (‘Mondrian’), or the prefix ‘pseudo’ (pseudo-Mondrian), etc. Thus, within the story called history this painting is not attributed to Mondrian but to ‘Mondrian’. However, we might consider stories other than history in which the second painting (a copy) could be by Mondrian as well. One such story is a meta-history. It remembers history but its constitutive notions are not the same as those of history (chronology and uniqueness).

It is interesting to notice that in my 1986 lecture, while I was talking about the reappearance of Mondrian paintings signed using his initials but dated after his death, I didn’t reflect on the fact that I was in a similar role, giving a lecture many years after my own death. In that moment, I was as much a historical impossibility as those Mondrian paintings. In a chronological (historical) sense it is true. It’s been almost thirty years since my first reappearance, but I do not consider myself to be primarily a historical character. Rather, I see myself being in a way timeless, outside of history, the same as those copies of/by Mondrian that I tried to understand back then. However, even this, my recollection, cannot escape chronology in some way – thinking about it thirty years since my first reappearance. How do I, or how could I, relate to or remember all those years?

Not long ago, in the reviews of the *Recent Writings* book, I noticed various interpretations of my identity, from direct attribution to some other (contemporary) person, to using quotation marks (‘Walter Benjamin’), to complete respect for the propositions related to my current identity, without appearing to be ‘naïve’.⁵ A single Walter Benjamin is meaningful only within a narrative that is based on chronology and the uniqueness of its characters; in other words, within a story called history. As a character within a meta-history, I am timeless. I could appear in various events, stories, tales and episodes, and even give the same lecture in two different places simultaneously.

DM: When the caretaker of the Museum of American Art put us in touch, he was telling me about an exhibition he was involved in hanging a few years ago titled ‘Not-Now’, which you wrote a text for.⁶ It seems to have been based in similar concerns. Could you describe the project?

WB: Once, while I was looking into the way we structure the time as *past*, *present* and *future*, I began thinking about whether it would make sense to have a simpler, binary structure of *now* and *not-now*. *Not-now* would be a blend of two components: *past* and *future*. Usually we place *past* before *now*, and *future*, after. Would it in some cases make more sense if *past* and *future* changed places, or even became an indistinguishable mixture of these two? Or could this *not-now* be something completely different from *past* and *future*? Furthermore, would it be possible to think about the world, about ourselves, as having only *now*, or as without any notion of time at all?

Since these are thoughts expressed through words and sentences – with all the limitations of the verbal language – I began wondering if it would be possible to use some other means, let’s say pictures, to articulate the way we structure time. This is how the idea for an exhibition of paintings came to my mind. At some point I remembered seeing an unusual collection of old religious paintings hanging in some obscure place in Belgrade, where I also lectured on Mondrian back in the 1980s. I thought that perhaps there might be other copies of modern art hidden somewhere. And I was right. Through with my old contacts there I was able to find copies of Mondrian, Picasso, Duchamp, Malevich, Arp, Picabia... Some were apparently left from the 1986 Armory Show (dated 1993) that took place in Belgrade a few months after my lecture.⁷ Then, with some ‘digging’, we located the religious paintings as well: *The Crucifixion*, *The Entombment*, *The Immaculate Conception*, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, *Saint Michael*, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*...

5 See Clancy Martin’s review in *The Brooklyn Rail*, 15 July 2014, available at http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/07/art_books/walter-benjamin-recent-writings (last accessed on 12 July 2016).

6 ‘Not Now’, Novobeogradska kulturna mreža (New Belgrade Cultural Network), Belgrade, 2013.

7 ‘International Exhibition of Modern Art, New York, 1993’, Muzej Savremene Umetnosti (Museum of Contemporary Art), Belgrade, 1986.



Installation view, 'Not-Now', Novobeogradska kulturna mreža (New Belgrade Cultural Network), Belgrade, 2013

This turned out to be very good combination of paintings for 'Not-Now'. They were hung in the foyer of an amateur theatre located on the periphery of New Belgrade, with the pre-modern paintings preceding the modern and sometimes even partially overlapping with them. And this was the text that accompanied the exhibition:

The pictures before us represent scenes of times gone by. They were all icons in stories of religion and of art. Some depicted events from the past, while others anticipated the future. Today, they are nothing more than artefacts displayed here neither as art nor as religion. While the pictures of the future became antiquities, the world emerging before us begins to resemble stories from the distant past. In a way it seems that the differences between the future and the past are disappearing, as if they are both becoming the one and the same meta-time that is not-now.

DM: How could social life be structured without chronology?

WB: In rural Europe for many centuries there was no need to structure time chronologically in order to organise life. For social stability it was sufficient to structure each year according to the climate. There were four distinct climate seasons, each with specific rules of behaviour that would be repeated in cycles. It was not necessary to know what the current year was, or according to which calendar. A person, for example, wouldn't know the year of his or her birth. With other members of the same generation, she or he would pass through several stages of life: child, young adult, married, parent, elder. This five-point structure is itself timeless, and the (biological) changes, although manifested in time, are not necessarily chronological. Since the existing social paradigm is based on chronology, there are two possible options to get out of it. One would be to forget chronology and return to a rural, non-chronological structure. Another possibility would be a meta-chronology, a structure that would remember or reflect chronology but without itself being based on chronology. This could be some kind of network, a structure based on neighbourhood relationships, like the graphs in topology.

DM: This also makes me think of the Salon de Fleurus, held in a New York apartment since the early 1990s. Its environment conjured an alternative reality, where different timelines were made to clash and coexist, and where modernism becomes something like a distant memory, a set of half-remembered founding myths and artefacts. Do you know this project?

Prehistory



Modernism





Egypt



Greece



Neoclassicism



Baroque



Modern



WB: The 1990s seem to have been almost a period of hibernation for me. I don't remember doing much those years, but from what I learned about it later, the Salon de Fleurus was a kind of re-creation of the early collection of modern art assembled by Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo in Paris. Placed in a private apartment outside of the art scene, the New York Salon was exhibiting not original works but some kind of copies, in sepia colour, of well-known paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Cézanne. I heard that a visitor once noted that the paintings looked as if they were 'older than the originals'; another, that it was like an 'ethnographic exhibition of modern art'. This is perhaps one of the most profound interpretations of what Salon de Fleurus was, but here the 'other' doesn't come from some 'exotic and faraway land': the other in this case is 'us', Western culture, and art as one of its inventions.

Previous spread:
The Making of Art History, installation view, from the exhibition 'The Unmaking of Art', e-flux, New York, 2014-15

DM: This idea, the 'ethnographic exhibition of modern art', chimes with work currently being done around decolonisation, among a wide spectrum of attempts to negotiate the manifold violences perpetrated in the name of Western modernity. From the perspective of the contemporary geo-political situation we find ourselves in, with all its crises and uncertainties, what is your sense of 'what's next'? Or if 'what's next' is too linear a question, at least, 'what's *not-now*'?

WB: The present is usually chaotic. When the present becomes the past, we can make stories about it and thus introduce order into the chaos. This is why a 'museum of modern art' could be only about what modern art *was* and not what it *is*, while 'museum of contemporary art' is an oxymoron.

It seems it is usually much easier to (re)interpret the past than to anticipate the future, and the way we (re)interpret the past in many ways determines what we are going to do in the

In recent decades the art scene has become one of the places for social critique, similar to the institution of the court jester.

future. This way of thinking makes sense within the existing linear triad: past-present-future. However, to go outside this linear model, everything that is not now we could call 'not-now'. This 'not-now' is not 'time', it is a 'meta-time'. For instance, we could hold a photograph of a tree in front of the same tree, and they both exist now, but the photograph remembers another instance of time

that was once 'now' but that is now 'not-now'. This recorded and frozen 'now' is a reflected time, it is a 'meta-time'. Similarly, anticipating a future event is imagining it now – in a way 'remembering' it in the present, although it didn't happen yet.

Meta-history remembers history, the meta-original remembers the original, meta-art remembers art, the meta-museum remembers the museum. And the constitutive notions of meta are not the same as the constitutive notions of what it is meta to: a copy is a meta-original, and although it remembers the original, its defining properties are different – in fact, opposite to it. A copy is, in this way, an antithesis of the original. Similarly, constitutive notions of meta-history could not be the same as those that structure history, namely, chronology and uniqueness. Meta-history could be a non-chronological time structure (like in a myth or a tale), or it could be a timeless structure like a web – and also, its characters and events are not unique.

As I mentioned earlier, a copy of a modern painting is not a modern painting. It is only the subject matter that is modern while the method itself (copying/imitation) is pre-modern. Thus, when we are looking at an exhibition based on copies of modern paintings, we are in some way looking into modernity through pre-modern – in a way, medieval – glasses. The fact that this kind of exhibition 'remembers' modernity while it is, itself, not modern, indicates that we are entering another territory we could call a meta-modernity.

Any attempt to 'de-modernise' could not be neutral: the question is whether it is going to be more on the side of remembering than on the side of forgetting. Christianity was, in its first centuries, on the side of forgetting the past (Rome), while the French Revolution, although attempting to forget (the Middle Ages), turned out to be on the side of remembering thanks to its embrace of history as a new and seemingly objective story about the past, based on chronology and uniqueness. By remembering (interpreting/reflecting) modernity through its antithesis, we are of course not modern any more – but we are not exactly medieval either.

Culturally, it seems we are already living in the transitional period that will mark not

only the end of modernism but the end of modernity as well. Most likely there will first be a 'return to the Middle Ages' (pre-modernity) with an emphasis on religion (Christianity in the West) as a key common identity and a simultaneous adoption and reinterpretation of some of the achievements of the Enlightenment, primarily natural (experimental) science and technology. At the same time, there will be an effort to forget modernity as much as is possible. Modernity itself has exhausted its potential mainly because of its claim on universality (the 'single point of view'). This is the primary reason for its decline, not because the 'new medieval' position offers a better alternative. Both Christianity and modernity played the key roles in shaping the 'Western world' and brought us where we are today. The difference between these two was that modernity was in essence a meta-Christianity. It came out of Christianity while remembering it, but was at the same time outside of it. Until now, one could see (experience) Christianity in two ways: by being a believer and thus inside it, or being secular and observing it from the position of modernity. Meta-modernity should define a third position from which we might see Christianity, looking through the glasses of modernity (through history), but from which we might also observe it from outside of modernity and remain non-believers.

DM: How does contemporary art, along with its existing characters, institutions and histories, fit into this?

WB: While meta-modernity will try to redefine and incorporate science and technology, it is likely that the importance of art, art history and art museums, as we know them today, will decline. Art as a notion will become obsolete – for me, it already is – together with the notions of uniqueness, originality and authorship, while what will remain of its infrastructure will have to change its role and meaning. Art as a national symbol ('the French model') will decline, together with the decline of the importance of the nation state; art as a commodity ('the Dutch model') will continue to exist as long as investors can profit. This is the main driving force behind the art market today. People are buying art not in order to support certain ideas, but as a trophy, expecting that its value will increase with time. In a way, this is not much different from collecting stamps or baseball cards – or stocks, for that matter.

Then, there is the art scene. In recent decades it has become one of the places for social critique, in some ways similar to the institution of the court jester. It is a stage on which, under the umbrella of artistic freedom, certain critical ideas can be articulated and expressed with impunity; one on which one (an artist) can speak 'truth to power'. This can be, of course, an important social role, but the question is how effective it is, and whether it is sustainable in the long run if the very idea of art becomes obsolete.

Then, the art museums: most of them will probably morph into some kind of cultural museum (meta-museum), into places where a certain kind of culture called 'art' will be remembered. These might resemble anthropological museums, of art as a Western invention, while the (art) history, as a corresponding notion, will be remembered through meta-history. We should not forget that both museum and history, defined within Western culture, colonised their own (Western) past before beginning to colonise the 'others'. Thus, meta-modernity would enable a platform open to other cultures as well, but on equal footing with the one that defines the West. From this place we should be able to approach all of them from the outside while not necessarily belonging to any of them.

In existing classical art museums there are, in principle, two kinds of artefacts. Ones that were produced before the emergence of the museum and others produced after (in the field of museums). The first group has at least two layers of meaning (let's say a religious painting in a church that becomes an artwork in a museum). Those works produced after the museum's emergence have only one layer of meaning: they are only works of art. When some of these artworks get another layer of meaning, through some process of 'de-artisation', it will indicate that we are in a different paradigm. One that is meta in relation to the present paradigm.

DM: Finally, could I ask what you are working on now?

WB: Right now I am working on this, our conversation, and everything else is not-now.